

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2009

The Commission is pleased to share with the reader that in the course of the year, we were able to achieve a full complement of 9 Commissioners, which included three students. The students were selected from a group of five who were invited to see what a HRC meeting comprised and to engage the regulars in a question/answer session.

We were confronted with several items of concern to discuss and resolve during the year which excluded the August meeting, a planned omission, and December, when we failed to attain a quorum upon polling the members.

We had been continually informed of conditions in Darfur and were informed that executions in the Sudan had been decreasing [33 per month on average] although the military trials were conducted very quietly sans defense attorneys.

Dr. Brett-Genny Janiczeh Beemyn of the UMass Stonewall Center made a request for support in changing the code to include non discriminatory language regarding gender identity, and had prepared a letter for Town Meeting via the Select Board. 108 cities and towns and 13 states have reportedly adopted such protection language.

We, again, discussed the HRC's Town celebration of Rev. Martin Luther King throughout the year without successfully defining the details. We informally support the annual, popular 26th breakfast at the Middle School.

A discussion of a Civilian Review board was also discussed but was effectively tabled by the Director, Chair and Select Board Liaison Weiss until the new Police Chief was selected and the dictates of Town situations warranted same. The three mentioned above were part of the Committee to select the new Police Chief.

The Commission has been following the Jason Vassell case with interest as a follow up to our meeting with interim UMass Chancellor Tom Cole the previous year. A co-sponsored auction at Grace Church raised several dollars for his defense team. The Chair wrote to DA Scheibel for consideration of dropping the charges against Jason but did not receive a reply. The case continues.

The HRC was in support of a motion to restore \$66K to the Human Services budget and was prepared to speak to the issue at Town Meeting. The budget was subsequently supported from other funds.

Complaints to the Director have been minimal. It was speculated that the loss of the office at the Bangs Center plus the lack of a friendly, accessible office are primarily the reason. Additionally, the lack of Town funds and a hiring freeze hampers the hiring of a HRC director. Our Director was elevated to the Town's Human Resources officer while retaining the 10-hour HRC position.

The Mill River *Juneteenth* Potluck Gathering was able to recognize 7 Young Heroes and 2 adult Service Awardees, Ms. Jean Haggerty and Mr. Isaac Ben Ezra. Among the 100

attendees was the new Superintendent of Schools, Select Board member Gerald Weiss and Representative Ellen Story.

Educational Consultant Michael Burkart presented to the Commission data collected over 12 years to support the concerns we have with disproportionate discipline and suspensions of students of color in the high school. The Chair's seat on the RaDAR Committee remains vigilant in monitoring and addressing this issue. Commissioner Anderson continues to work with students in a high school group studying race and class on a weekly basis.

The Commission co-sponsored a forum on American Torture at the Amherst Unitarian Universalist Church with Mr. Chris Pyle of Mt. Holyoke College the featured speaker.

A 5-0 vote was critical to oppose proposed state legislation to speed the process of signing local control access of TV stations.

Dr. Ruth Hooke made a presentation/request for our support to approve of the two Guantanamo detainees to come to Amherst. A caveat - that such detainees be reviewed on a case-by-case basis was formally approved by vote.

On Dec. 10 the team shared the celebration of the annual reading of the Declaration of Human Rights vigil on the Town Common with the Town Manager and community members stopping to participate.

A few members of the Commission participated in the Amherst 250th Anniversary parade. A photographic record was made by the Chair.

We have determined to make more visible the activities of the Commission using ACTV and articles in local newspapers as issues and educational forums become important venues for the community. Our website is under construction by a Commissioner to additionally aid this initiative.

Respectfully submitted,

Reynolds B. Winslow; Chair
Eunice Torres; Director